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FOOTBALL

Khalifa Stadium to host Amir Cup final on May 24

Al Thumama, Jassim Bin Hamad and Abdullah Bin Khalifa stadiums will also host matches

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Qatar Football Association (QFA) yesterday confirmed that the final of the 53rd Amir Cup will be staged at the iconic Khalifa International Stadium on May 24.

The announcement was made during a press conference held on the sidelines of the Round of 16 draw, where QFA's Head of Competitions, Ali Hamoud al-Nuaimi, also revealed that three other prominent venues – Al Thumama Stadium, Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium and Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium – will host matches throughout the knockout rounds of this year's edition. Al-Nuaimi said the association is aiming to ensure a competitive and well-organised tournament across all participating clubs and venues.

The Round of 16 will feature 12 sides from the Qatar Stars League and four qualifiers from the Second Division. The tournament, renowned for its history and prestige, will follow a single-match knockout format, with extra time and penalty shootouts to be used if necessary to determine the winner. Round of 16 fixtures are Al Ahli vs Qatar SC; Al Shahaniya vs Mesaimeer; Al Rayyan vs Lusail; Al Duhail vs Al Saliya; Al Gharafa vs Al Khor; Al Sadd vs Al Kharaitiyat; Al Wakrah vs Umm Salal and Al Shamal vs Al Arabi.

Meanwhile, QFA's Head of Media, Ali al-Salat, provided an update on the tournament's fan engagement strategy. He noted that the promotional campaign launched during the preliminary rounds is now in full swing. "The campaign has entered its



The draw for the round of 16 matches for the 53rd edition of the Amir Cup was held yesterday.

Amir Cup 2025		
ROUND OF 16 MATCHES		
SUNDAY 4 MAY 2025		
AL SHAHANIA	17:15	MESAIMEER
AL AHLI	20:15	QATAR SC
MONDAY 5 MAY 2025		
AL DUHAIL	17:15	AL SAILIYA
AL RAYYAN	20:15	LUSAIL
TUESDAY 6 MAY 2025		
AL GHARAF	17:15	AL KHOR
AL SADD	20:15	AL KHARAITIYAT
WEDNESDAY 7 MAY 2025		
AL WAKRAH	17:15	UMM SALAL
AL SHAMAL	20:15	AL ARABI

most exciting phase and will continue to engage fans across the country," al-Salat said. "Lucrative prizes for fans will be up for grabs during the matches, with more details to be announced soon via the QFA's official media channels."

Coaches and team officials spoke of their ambitions and expectations, emphasising strong performances and the desire to lift the coveted trophy. Mohammed Gholam, Sporting Director of league champions Al Sadd, outlined his team's objective to complete a domestic double this season.

"We want to keep winning titles and compete strongly to achieve the double this season," Gholam said.

"Our focus will be on the first match against Al Kharaitiyat, a strong team. We'll begin preparations for the 53rd edition of the tournament with great motivation after successfully winning the league title."

Christophe Galtier, head coach of Al Duhail, acknowledged the strength of their Round of 16 opponents and the importance of the Amir Cup in salvaging their season.

"Our match against Al Saliya in the round of 16 of the Amir's Cup will be a difficult one. They've had a successful run in the second division and earned promotion to the first division," Galtier said. "I hope to lead Al Duhail to their fifth title. This is especially important to make up for our

disappointment in the league this season."

Khaled Taj, assistant coach of Al Ahli, said his team is fully committed to making a deep run in the competition and delivering for their fans. "We are committed to delivering the performance expected of us in this prestigious tournament and advancing to the final stages," Taj said.

"Our chances against Qatar SC are equal, considering both teams' positions in the QSL this season. It will be a strong match, as each team knows the other well. After our outstanding performance in the league and reaching the top four, we hope to continue our journey in the tournament and meet our fans' expectations."

Pedro Martins, head coach of Al Gharafa, acknowledged the challenge posed by the draw but remained optimistic about his side's chances.

"The Amir's Cup draw was a tough one for us. Facing Al Khor in the first match, and potentially meeting league champions Al Sadd in the quarter-finals, is a real challenge. Both teams have big ambitions in this tournament," Martins said.

"We aim to win the championship for the eighth time in the club's history. After finishing third in the league and being strong competitors throughout the season, the team has a good morale boost. That momentum will help us in our quest to bring Al Gharafa back to the podium."

FOCUS

Ooredoo and QFA celebrate 25 years of partnership with new sponsorship of Amir Cup



Thani Ali al-Malki, Chief Business Officer of Ooredoo, and Mansoor Mohammed al-Ansari, General Secretary of Qatar Football Association, pose after the sponsorship signing ceremony.

Ooredoo, Qatar's leading telecommunications operator, and the Qatar Football Association (QFA) renewed their historic partnership with a new four-year sponsorship agreement for the prestigious Amir Cup, reinforcing a relationship that has flourished for over 25 years.

The signing ceremony took place during the draw for the Amir Cup. Thani Ali al-Malki, Chief Business Officer (CBO) of Ooredoo, and Mansoor Mohammed al-Ansari, General Secretary of the Qatar Football Association, signed the agreement.

Al-Malki commented on the collaboration: "Celebrating 25 years of partnership with the QFA through this renewed sponsorship of the Amir Cup is a proud milestone for us. This collaboration demonstrates our enduring support for national sports and reinforces our commitment to bringing the excitement of football into the hearts of communities across Qatar."

Further highlighting the partnership, al-Ansari said: "It is our pleasure to announce today the renewal of the sponsorship agreement with Ooredoo until 2028, under which Ooredoo will continue as the official telecommunications sponsor of the Amir Cup. This sponsorship will undoubtedly be a valuable addition to our work at the Qatar Football Association, aligning with the association's vision and strategy. It also reflects the strong and longstanding relationship we share with our partners at Ooredoo. We look forward to activating this sponsorship in a way that brings mutual benefit to both parties."

This landmark renewal underscores Ooredoo's position as a key supporter of Qatar's sporting landscape. The sponsorship reflects both parties' long-term dedication to elevating Qatari football and engaging communities through one of the nation's most celebrated sporting events.

HORSE RACING

Wathnan Racing's Moneer claims first group victory in Prix Dormane

Wathnan Racing's Moneer, a four-year-old colt, landed his first Group win in the Group 3 (PA) Prix Dormane - Wathba Stud Farm at La Teste, France, yesterday, over 1900m.

This victory marks his second win from three starts, with the colt showing great promise in his brief, but impressive career. Damien De Watrigant-trained Moneer was up against a competitive field of six runners, with Maqbool seen as favourite.

The race was led by Mohtaram, with Moneer travelling in second while Maqbool was at the back of the pack.

As the field approached the home straight, Moneer was travelling strongly, looking poised to strike. And he accelerating with impressive power to take the lead. Maqbool, who was closing in with a late challenge, looked like a potential threat, but Moneer showed his class, digging deep and finding extra to extend his lead. With



Jean-Bernard Eyquem rides Moneer to victory.

a smooth, commanding ride from the in-form Jean-Bernard Eyquem, Moneer surged ahead and crossed the line a comfortable three lengths winner, holding off the Maqbool. Mukatel Al

Shahania finished third. Bred by Mohammed al-Najafi, Moneer is out of Muneera, a winner of the Group 1 (PA) Qatar Total Arabian Trophy des Juments over 2000m at four.

Intisar De Monlau claims second Group 2 win in Prix Nefta

Paris: Intisar De Monlau, a four-year-old filly, secured her second Group 2 (PA) victory in dominant fashion, winning the Prix Nefta - Wathba Stud Farm over 2000m at La Teste, France, yesterday. The race featured a field of six runners.

Trained by Mme Jean-François Bernard and owned by Mubarak Ali M A al-Nuaimi, Intisar De Monlau showed great promise last season and it was clear from the outset that she had the potential to secure a win in this race.

The race was led by Shumma, with Intisar De Monlau travelling in fourth.

Once in the final straight, she quickly asserted his dominance, proving far too strong for the rest of the field. Ridden by Jean-Bernard Eyquem, Intisar De Monlau surged to the front and won comfortably by two and a half lengths. Shumma held on for second, while Alhaan finished third.

Bred by Robert Bourdette and Suc. Marie Ange Bourdette, Intisar De Monlau is out of Leila De Monlau, a daughter of Amina De Monlau. Leila is a half-sister to Africa De Monlau, winner of a Gr.2 (PA) of the French Arabian Breeders' Challenge - Pouliches over 2000m at three.



Khalifa, Gabriela impress at Al Shaqab International League



Khalifa bin Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani and Gabriela Aleksandra Liberska emerged triumphant at the second Al Shaqab International League yesterday. Khalifa topped the Introductory Class 2 (80cm) event, while Jassim Saoud al-Darwish finished second, followed by Maryam Abdulla al-Sulaiti, Mohammed Ali al-Khulaifi, Jabr Mohannad Nasser al-Nuaimi and Kaltham Thani al-Sowaidi. In the 40cm class, Liberska claimed victory, followed by Faisal Ali al-Jaber, Meshael Mohammed al-Thani, Mashaal Hamad al-Yafei, Hamad Mohammed al-Thani and Ali Jaber Ali al-Souror.



Amir Cup Basketball: Al Arabi and Al Ahli register wins



Defending champions Al Arabi defeated Qatar SC 117-72 in the Amir Cup basketball match at the Al Gharafa Club Hall yesterday. Mustafa Hussein scored the match-high 33 points for the winner. In the other match of the day, Al Ahli overcame Al Sadd to win 80-78 and Giorgos Mikoniatis netted 21 points for the QSC. Mohammed Hashem was the top scorer for Al Ahli with 20 points, while Al Sadd's Archie Goodwin emerged as the top scorer of the match with 24 points.



INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Pacer Hazlewood lifts Bengaluru over Rajasthan

The experienced Australian bowler returns figures of 4 for 33

AFP
Bengaluru

Australian pacer Josh Hazlewood starred with 4-33 in Royal Challengers Bengaluru's 11 run IPL win at home against Rajasthan Royals, who won the toss and chose to field first yesterday.

Chasing 206 to win after Bengaluru's 205-5, Rajasthan looked comfortable before Dhruv Jurel was dismissed by Hazlewood in the 19th over of the chase.

Jurel scored a 34-ball 47 and was removed with 17 needed off 9 balls for the win.

Hazlewood removed England's Jofra Archer on the next ball, leaving Royals reeling with 17 needed off the final over.

Earlier, Indian batting superstar Virat Kohli hit a 42-ball 70 to steer Bengaluru to a par score on a batting friendly Bengaluru wicket.

Openers Kohli and Phil Salt raced to 59-0 in the powerplay before Salt was removed on 26 in the seventh over with the team on 61-1.

Kohli then built an important 95 run partnership with Devdutt Padikkal before finally falling in the 16th over to Archer.

Padikkal, who was batting very well, fell soon after a 27-ball 50, with Bengaluru on 161-3.

Quick wickets towards the end took away the momentum before key cameos by Tim David (23) and Jitesh Sharma, who remained unbeaten on 20.

Archer was Rajasthan's stand-



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Josh Hazlewood (left) celebrates after taking the wicket of Rajasthan Royals' Shimron Hetmyer (right) during the IPL match in Bengaluru yesterday. (AFP)

out bowler and finished with 33-1. Sandeep Sharma took 2-45 and Sri Lanka's Wanindu Hasaranga finished with 1-30.

Rajasthan's young top-order batters started really well and stayed ahead of the required run rate for the first half of the chase.

Indian Test opening batsman Yashasvi Jaiswal hit 19-ball 49 before he was removed by Hazlewood.

His opening partner, Vaibhav Suryavanshi fell early on 16 to India veteran Bhuvneshwar Ku-

mar, who finished with 1-50 in his four-over spell.

Spinner Krunal Pandya bowled an important spell and removed both Nitish Rana (28) and Rajasthan skipper Riyan Parag (22) who looked dangerous after the fall of initial wickets.

Rajasthan were cruising before Rana's wicket in the 14th over but its batters failed to convert starts into a score to help their team cross the finish line.

"I think we did really well with the ball... We held them back real-

ly well," Parag said after the game. "With the batting, I thought at the halfway mark we were in the driving seat," he added.

But "we have ourselves to blame... (The team was) in the driving seat and we let it slip".

BRIEF SCORES

Royal Challengers Bengaluru 205 for 5 (Kohli 70, Padikkal 50, Sandeep 2-45) **beat Rajasthan Royals 194 for 9** (Jaiswal 49, Jurel 47, Hazlewood 4-33, Krunal 2-31) **by 11 runs.**

FOCUS

New Zealand to launch Major League Cricket franchise in 2027

Reuters
Auckland

New Zealand Cricket (NZC) said it has agreed terms with American company True North Sports Ventures (TNS) to launch a new Major League Cricket (MLC) franchise that will debut in the 2027 season.

NZC said it would be a "first-of-its-kind agreement" between a full member of the International Cricket Council and a franchise of a professional cricket league, with TNS looking at Toronto and Atlanta among other cities to base the franchise.

NZC will provide "high-performance and operational support" which includes coaching, management and support staff for the Twenty20 tournament which had its inaugural edition staged in

2023. "As franchise cricket grows globally, NZC needs to adapt to seize strategic opportunities that ensure the sustainability of our cricket network," NZC chief executive Scott Weenink said in a statement.

"This helps diversify our revenue streams, expands our global brand and fan base, and creates new talent development and retention pathways for both our players and coaches."

MLC currently has six teams based in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Texas and Washington DC.

They plan to expand to eight teams by the 2027 season and 10 by 2031.

NZC also said it has the opportunity to partner with MLC co-founders Sameer Mehta and Vijay Srinivasan on other opportunities, which include a second franchise planned for 2031.

Athletics: Al Ahli win Amir Cup



Al Ahli SC clinched the Amir Cup Athletics Championship title triumphing over eight other participating clubs: Al Sadd, Al Gharafa, Al Rayyan, Al Arabi, Al Shamal, Qatar, Al Wakrah and Al Khor. Held at the Al Rayyan field and track, this championship is a significant event for the Qatar Athletics Federation. Al Ahli demonstrated remarkable prowess in both track and field events, amassing 163 points. This impressive score placed them comfortably ahead of Al Arabi, who secured second place with 150 points. Al Sadd claimed the third position with 98 points. The subsequent rankings were Al Qatar (71 points), Al Khor (65), Al Rayyan and Al Khor (both with 65), Al Wakrah (55), Al Gharafa (49), and Al Shamal (39).

COMMENT

'I thought my face had come off': cricket star Flintoff reveals crash horror

AFP
London

Andrew Flintoff has revealed he thought his "face had come" off during the horrific car crash that left the former England all-rounder wishing he had died.

Flintoff suffered serious facial injuries and broken ribs during the accident while filming for hugely popular television programme *Top Gear* in 2022.

The 47-year-old has spoken at length about the sickening crash in a new *Disney+* documentary *Flin-*

toff, which premieres today. Flintoff, a key member of England's 2005 Ashes-winning side against Australia, admitted he feared he had been damaged beyond repair by the crash.

"After the accident I didn't think I had it in me to get through. This sounds awful, part of me wishes I'd been killed. Part of me thinks, I wish I'd died," he said.

'I didn't want to kill myself'
"I didn't want to kill myself. I wouldn't mistake the two things. I was not wishing, I was just thinking, 'this would have been so much easier'"

Flintoff was driving a Morgan Super 3 three-wheeled sports car when it overturned.

The open-topped car is capable of hitting 130mph (209km/h) and the cricketer wasn't wearing a helmet when it flipped over.

Flintoff's surgeon Jahrad Haq describes the former England captain's injuries as among the five worst he has come across in 20 years and likened the reconstruction process to a jigsaw with missing pieces.

"I remember my head got hit, I got dragged out. I went over the back of the car and it pulled my face down on the runway, about 50

metres, underneath the car," Flintoff said.

"My biggest fear was, I didn't think I had a face. I thought my face had come off. I was frightened to death."

The *BBC* "rested" *Top Gear* for the foreseeable future in 2023 after reaching a financial settlement with Flintoff.

But he remains resentful about the entertainment culture he was involved in, likening it to his own injury-ravaged playing career.

"I learned this in sport as well. All the injuries, all the injections, all the times I got sent out on a cricket field and treated like a piece

of meat," he said. "That's TV and sport. It's quite similar, you're just a commodity."

Despite regular flashbacks about the accident, Flintoff has gradually rediscovered the motivation to resume his public life as head coach of England Lions and Northern Superchargers.

"I don't think I'm ever going to be better, just different now. I'm getting there slowly," he said.

"Now I try to take the attitude that the sun will come up tomorrow and my kids will still give me a hug."

"I'm probably in a better place now."



TENNIS

Alcaraz withdraws from Madrid Open with injury

‘I DID EVERYTHING THAT WAS IN MY HANDS BUT IT DIDN’T IMPROVE A LOT OVER THE LAST FEW DAYS’

Agencies
Madrid

World number three Carlos Alcaraz withdrew from the Madrid Open yesterday with a thigh injury, in a blow for his French Open title defence preparations.

The Spaniard, a four-time Grand Slam winner, sustained the problem during his Barcelona Open final defeat last Sunday by Holger Rune.

“I did everything that was in my hands but it didn’t improve a lot over the (last few) days,” Alcaraz told a news conference.

“Things didn’t work out as I wanted to be able to play here, and we have decided not to take risks.

“If I played, I was going to be messed up for longer than expected... hard decisions had to be made, and I think we made the right one.”

Alcaraz was hoping to lift the trophy in Madrid for the third time after his 2022 and 2023 victories.

The 21-year-old had not trained all week after arriving in the Spanish capital on Monday.

Alcaraz did not rule out competing in the Italian Open and said he was sure he would make the French Open, with the main draw beginning on May 25.

“I think I will definitely be at Roland Garros and I will do everything possible to be in Rome,” said Alcaraz.

“On Monday I’ll have another test to see how it’s evolved, and from there we’ll take the timings and evaluate how the next few weeks are going to be and how my body is doing.”

Alcaraz said in addition to the right thigh injury he suffered in Barcelona he had also noticed a problem with his left hamstring.

He has struggled for consistency over the first few months of the year, knocked out early in Miami but then winning the Monte Carlo Masters in April.

“It was the first year I went re-



Carlos Alcaraz walks off the court following a training session ahead of his first match at the Madrid Open. Alcaraz yesterday pulled out of the tournament citing an injury. (@MutuaMadridOpen)

ally far in Monte Carlo but it was also the first year I lost in the first match in Miami, so I had time to prepare for the clay season,” Alcaraz said.

“It is not easy – a different surface, coming from hard court to clay court and playing so many matches in a row and having no time to rest, is not easy.

“Tennis players have to take difficult decisions sometimes.”

Djokovic still hungry in Madrid amid changing of the guard
As tennis moves into a future filled

with new stars and fresh rivalries, the former No. 1 in the PIF ATP Rankings remains determined as ever. Returning this week to the Mutua Madrid Open, where he is a three-time champion, Novak Djokovic was asked about the changing landscape of the ATP Tour, and where he fits into it.

“You can feel there’s a shift,” Djokovic said in his press conference at the ATP Masters 1000 event. “Not only in terms of the generations of players (who now have) the main focus and attention, but I guess it takes a little bit



A boil on Novak Djokovic’s right eye is visible during a press conference at the Madrid Open yesterday. (AFP)

of time for people to accept the fact that Roger and Rafa are not playing, and Murray, and I guess one day myself, but I’m still trying to stay there and represent the older guys, the older generation.”

Djokovic arrives in the Spanish capital looking to rebound from a shock opening-round exit in Monte-Carlo earlier this month, when he fell to Alejandro Tabilo.

The defeat followed a loss in the Miami final to Czech Jakub Menšik, denying Djokovic a chance at securing his 100th tour-level title.

The 40-time ATP Masters 1000 champion, Djokovic remains on the brink of joining Jimmy Connors (109) and Roger Federer (103) in the history books. But for the 37-year-old, it’s not just the records and trophies that keep him motivated.

“That’s also one of the reasons why I keep on playing is because I feel like it also helps tennis still thrive on the attention and crowd coming in, watching tournaments and getting interested,” added Djokovic. “If you see the numbers actually of the attendance in the Grand Slams, and some (other tournaments), (there has been) record-breaking crowds in the last few years.”

This week marks Djokovic’s first appearance in Madrid since 2022, when he lost to Carlos Alcaraz in the semi-finals.

Swiatek survives Eala scare to start Madrid Open defence

Madrid: Defending Madrid Open champion Iga Swiatek survived a debut scare to beat rising teenage star Alexandra Eala 4-6, 6-4, 6-2 yesterday and reach the third round in the Spanish capital. The 19-year-old Filipina, who beat Swiatek in straight sets on a shock run to the Miami Open semi-finals in March, claimed the first set as the world number two struggled.

Swiatek, who has been below her best so far this season, found her rhythm in the second set and eventually downed Eala, ranked 72nd, with ease in the third. “It wasn’t easy to get into the rhythm and the right timing and I’m happy that I was just patient,” Swiatek told Spanish broadcaster TVE. “I always love playing here, for sure I’m proud of my performances in the last two years.” Eala broke Swiatek in the first game and produced two battling holds on her first two service games, saving two break points in each as the Pole hunted for a way back in.

The exciting Filipina saved another break point in the sixth game before breaking Swiatek to love for a 5-2 lead in the Madrid sun. Clay court expert Swiatek recovered a break but Eala was

able to serve out her advantage, capturing her third set point when the five-time Grand Slam champion sent a backhand long. Swiatek only converted one of six first-set break points against the resilient Eala, who won both of hers.

The teenager again broke in the first game of the second set, but this time Swiatek, who has four French Open titles, was able to respond immediately. When Eala broke again for a 3-2 lead, Swiatek followed suit to get back on serve, with the Pole raising her level towards the end of the second set.

She broke to love in the 10th game to force a deciding set and sped through it, securing breaks in the second and sixth games. Eala wrestled a break back and saved a match point as Swiatek overcooked a backhand, but eventually the reigning champion triumphed as the teenager went long.

Swiatek will face Czech Linda Noskova in the third round. In other matches, Anastasija Sevastova ousted 2017 French Open winner and Latvian compatriot Jelena Ostapenko 7-6 (7/2), 6-2. Ostapenko beat Swiatek in the Stuttgart quarter-finals last week.



Poland's Iga Swiatek in action during her round of 64 match against Philippines' Alexandra Eala at the Madrid Open yesterday. (Reuters)

GOLF

Delighted McIlroy says his Masters title win ‘resonated’ with the public

AFP
Miami

Masters champion Rory McIlroy said the public’s reaction to his enthralling victory at Augusta National had shown that his journey had connected with people in a special way.

The Northern Irishman completed the career Grand Slam of major wins 10 days ago at the Masters, with an emotion-filled playoff win over England’s Justin Rose.

McIlroy had spent 11 years trying to add the Masters title to his wins in the other three majors and become just the sixth player in history to complete the career Grand Slam.

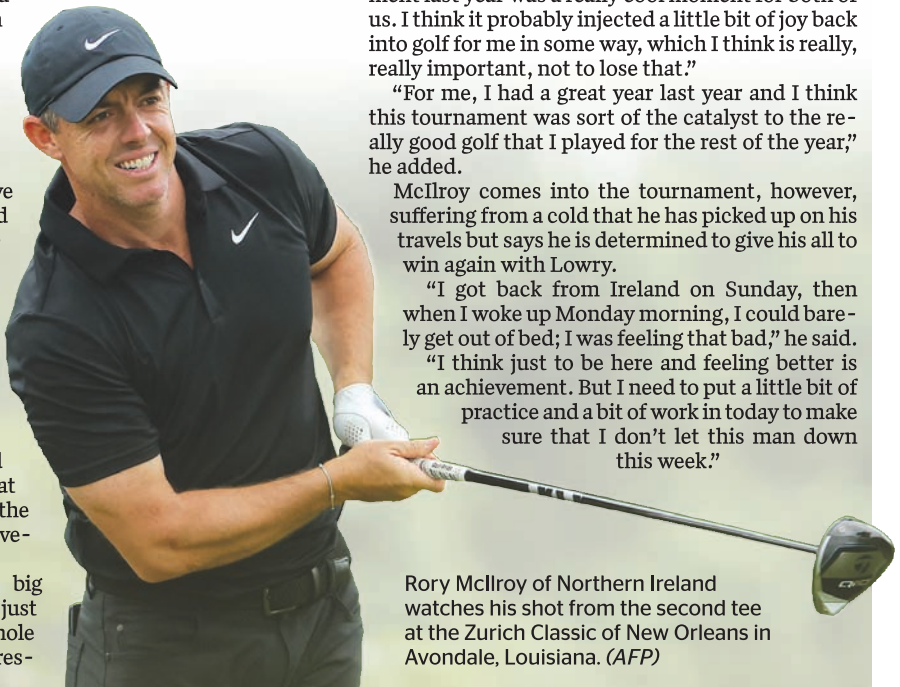
He did so in thrilling fashion, with his one-over 73 including six birdies, three bogeys and two double bogeys.

Since the tear-filled celebrations at Augusta, McIlroy has spent time with his family, including a trip home to Northern Ireland, but he is back in PGA Tour action yesterday at the Zurich Class of New Orleans team event where he aims to defend the title with Irish playing partner Shane Lowry.

Speaking ahead of the tournament, McIlroy said that he has received countless congratulations since sliding on the green jacket.

“It’s not every day you get to fulfil one of your life-long goals and dreams, and I’ve just really tried to enjoy everything that comes along with that,” he said. “It was an amazing few days after, and to be able to reflect on it and everything that happened and the magnitude of everything.”

“I think the big thing for me is just how the whole journey sort of res-



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland watches his shot from the second tee at the Zurich Classic of New Orleans in Avondale, Louisiana. (AFP)

onated with people and the people that have reached out to me. That’s been absolutely amazing.”

McIlroy said those congratulations came from all manner of people and from well beyond the sport itself.

“Yeah, very much beyond golf. I spoke to two presidents the day after, which was pretty cool. Just people reaching out from all walks of life, whether it be sports, entertainment, culture. Just all of it. People that you would never even think that would watch golf or would know what’s going on, that was very, very humbling, I guess,” he said.

Asked why he thought his win had connected so directly with people, McIlroy said his long battle to clinch his goal was relatable.

“I think people can see themselves in the struggle at times, and everything that you sort of try to put into getting the best out of yourself in that journey. I think people watching someone finally get it done, something they’ve been trying to do for a decade plus, I think it resonated with a lot of people,” he said.

The 35-year-old joins Tiger Woods, Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player, Ben Hogan and Gene Sarazen as the only winners of golf’s four professional majors.

The world number two said that last year’s win in New Orleans with Lowry had been a key step in his return to top form.

“It’s amazing what a year can do. This tournament last year was a really cool moment for both of us. I think it probably injected a little bit of joy back into golf for me in some way, which I think is really, really important, not to lose that.”

“For me, I had a great year last year and I think this tournament was sort of the catalyst to the really good golf that I played for the rest of the year,” he added.

McIlroy comes into the tournament, however, suffering from a cold that he has picked up on his travels but says he is determined to give his all to win again with Lowry.

“I got back from Ireland on Sunday, then when I woke up Monday morning, I could barely get out of bed; I was feeling that bad,” he said.

“I think just to be here and feeling better is an achievement. But I need to put a little bit of practice and a bit of work in today to make sure that I don’t let this man down this week.”

FOCUS

Rampaging Marquez hungry for more as MotoGP heads to Spain

AFP
Paris

Marc Marquez is determined to continue his blistering start to the MotoGP season as the riders gear up this weekend for their first visit to Spain.

The six-time world champion looks back to his dominating best after making the switch to the factory Ducati team, winning three of the opening four races and sweeping the sprints.

The Spaniard has not put a foot wrong this season, aside from his crash while leading the Grand Prix of the Americas in Texas last month.

His form is reminiscent of his peak between 2013 and 2019, when he won the world title six times, before a decline brought on by injuries.

Marquez, who leads the standings by 17 points ahead of younger brother Alex, is a three-time winner in Jerez – in 2014, 2018 and 2019, but Bagnaia has triumphed in each of the last three years.

“It’s one of the most special GPs. I think for every rider, but especially for Spanish riders. I have very good memories from there, some bad memories,” said Marquez, who also broke his arm at Jerez in 2020.

He missed an entire year as a result and had struggled to hit the same heights – until his “perfect start of the season.”

The 32-year-old will be supported by tens of thousands of home fans in Andalusia, where he finished second a year ago behind current teammate and double world champion Bagnaia.

“The main goal is try to be on the podium... and if we have the chance, and the level, we will try to win,” said Marquez, who has taken pole at every race in the new MotoGP season.

“We cannot forget Pecco (Bagnaia) won the last three years there



Team Gresini Racing MotoGP’s Alex Marquez (left) laughs with his brother Team Ducati Lenovo Team’s Marc Marquez during a press conference ahead of the MotoGP Spanish Grand Prix at the Jerez racetrack in Jerez de la Frontera yesterday. (AFP)

and Alex (Marquez) is in very good form.”

Bagnaia won in the US after Marquez’s error, but the Italian is already 26 points off the pace in third overall. “I would like to say Alex is the main rival but thinking about the long season, Pecco will be the main rival because he has the same tools as me,” said Marquez. “Alex is performing in a very good way... and I know the talent of my brother.”

MARTIN DISCHARGED FROM QATAR HOSPITAL

Bagnaia worked his way up from 11th on the grid to finish second at the Qatar Grand Prix to prevent Marquez from taking an ever bigger championship lead.

“In Qatar we strengthened out a weekend that, after qualifying, seemed really complicated. Another important podium and increasingly better riding sensations,” said Bagnaia.

“In the last three years I have achieved a lot in Jerez and I am happy to return for the GP,” he added.

“We have always been very fast and we have achieved the maximum result in the last seasons.”

Reigning world champion Jorge Martin will again be missing after a brutal crash in Qatar, his first race of the campaign after injuries ruled him out of the start of the season.

The 27-year-old suffered broken ribs and was left with blood and air in the space around his lungs in his latest fall.

He has since been discharged from a Doha hospital but has yet to travel back to Europe and is not expected to resume racing before the summer.

Italian Lorenzo Savadori is set to take Martin’s place in the Aprilia team in Spain, which will also host races in June and September as well as the season finale on November 16.

HORSE RACING

Kerindia clinches Season Finale Trophy with commanding win

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Kerindia lived up to her billing as the favourite with a commanding performance to capture the Season Finale Trophy at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

The five-year-old mare, owned by Injaaz Stud and trained by Zuhair Mohsen, was once again in a class of her own in the 1400m Thoroughbred (Class 1). Ridden by Pierre Charles Boudot, who completed a double on the day, Kerindia surged clear in the home straight, sealing her fifth consecutive win by two and a half lengths ahead of her nearest rival Aemilianus.

Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Racing Manager, Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi, presented the trophies to the winners. Boudot had earlier guided Safwan to victory in the Thoroughbred Handicap 80-100 (Class 2), marking the first of his two wins on the card. The second day of the End Of Season Cup meeting featured five races, including three cup contests.

In the Al Utouriya Cup, Posuelo Py returned to winning form with a well-timed finish. The seven-year-old gelding, owned by Ibrahim Mohammed M I al-Fadala and trained by Hamad al-Jehani, raced handily before jockey Szczepan Mazur unleashed



Pierre Charles Boudot rides Kerindia to Season Finale Trophy win at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. **PICTURES:** Juhaïm

him at the 200m mark. Producing a strong late burst, Posuelo Py edged past the frontrunners in the final strides to secure victory by a quarter of a length.

In the Al Karana Cup, Hay'er Al Shahania broke his maiden in style on his third career start, delivering a bold front-running effort. The grey colt, owned by

Mansoor Mesfer al-Shahwani and trained by Abdulla Mesfer al-Shahwani, made all the running and pulled away under Trevor Patel, winning by two lengths.

It was also a double on the day for Patel, who earlier steered Pearling Path to success in the Thoroughbred Handicap 70-90 (Class 3).



Connections of Kerindia celebrate with the trophies at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

RESULTS 43RD AL RAYYAN RACE MEET - END OF SEASON CUP (DIV 2) WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

- Season Finale Trophy - Thoroughbred (Class 1)
Kerindia, Zuhair Mohsen, Pierre Charles Boudot
- Al Utouriya Cup - Purebred Arabian Open Race (Class 2)
Posuelo Py, Hamad al-Jehani, Szczepan

- Mazur
- Al Karana Cup - Purebred Arabian Novice Plate (3yo Only) (Class 5)
Hay'er Al Shahania, Abdulla Mesfer al-Shahwani, Trevor Patel
 - Thoroughbred Handicap 80-100 (Class 2)
Safwan, Jean de Mieulle, Pierre Charles Boudot
 - Thoroughbred Handicap 70-90 (Class 3)
Pearling Path, Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, Trevor Patel

FOOTBALL

Leicester's Vardy to bid farewell to club after 13 seasons

Striker was a key member of the side that lifted league title in 2016

AFP
London

Jamie Vardy will leave former Premier League champions Leicester at the end of the season, the relegated club announced yesterday, describing the lightning-quick forward as their "greatest-ever player".

The talismanic striker, a key member of the side that lifted the English league title against seemingly impossible odds in 2016, vowed to continue playing even at the age of 38. The former England international joined the Foxes in 2012 from non-league side Fleetwood for just £1 million (\$1.3 million) and has scored 198 goals in nearly 500 appearances.

The club captain is Leicester's record Premier League goalscorer with 143 goals. He scored 24 times in the 2015/16 Premier League campaign, helping the Foxes to their first top-flight title in one of the greatest shocks in football history. Vardy was also part of Leicester's 2021 FA Cup-winning side, who beat Chelsea 1-0 at Wembley. "We can confirm legendary striker Jamie Vardy will leave Leicester City this summer after 13 seasons that have seen him become our greatest-ever player," the club said in a statement.

"Jamie is unique," said chairman Aiyawatt Srivaddhanaprabha. "He is a special player and an even more special person."

Vardy said he was "devastated" to be leaving the Foxes but the timing was right. "To the fans of Leicester, I'm gutted that this day is coming, but I knew it was going to come eventually," he said in a video message to fans. "I've spent 13 unbelievable years at this club, with lots of success, and some downs, but the majority have all been highs."

Vardy, who has scored seven goals in 31 league appearances this season, gave a scathing assessment of Leicester's campaign after relegation was confirmed on Sunday following a 1-0 defeat by Liverpool. "This season has been nothing but miserable and for me personally, a total embarrassment," he said in a social media post. "It hurts."

Ruud van Nistelrooy's side are 19th in the table, having collected just 18 points from their 33 matches and are heading back to the Cham-



Jamie Vardy joined Leicester's in 2012 from non-league side Fleetwood for just £1mn and has scored 198 goals in nearly 500 appearances. *(Reuters)*

pionship after just one season back in the top division. Vardy, the last remaining player from Leicester's 2016 title success still at the King Power Stadium, enjoyed a fairytale rise from the fifth tier of English football to the very top.

He played his part in the club's astonishing escape in the 2014/15 season, when they won seven of their last nine games to escape relegation. The following season his goals were a major factor in the club's 5,000-1 title charge under Claudio Ranieri - he scored in a record 11 consecutive Premier League fixtures.

His time at the King Power was also marked by tragedy when five people, including chairman Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha, were killed in a helicopter crash just outside the stadium in October 2018. "Nine years ago, we did the impossible, we won the Premier League," Vardy said in a video on his social media channels. "We then went on to win the FA Cup - that was for you, Vichai. We reached the Cham-

pions League quarter-finals. Before that, we pulled off the great escape."

He added: "My one regret - and I'm devastated about this - is that I'm not saying farewell to you on the back of a much better season. This isn't the way I wanted my career here to finish. Finally, this isn't retirement. I want to keep playing and doing what I enjoy most, scoring goals."

Leicester, who play Wolves tomorrow, have five games left this season. Van Nistelrooy said at his pre-match press conference that he had had a "special conversation" with Leicester's outgoing star. "He came to my office and told me what he had decided," said the Dutchman. "After that, we spoke for 45 minutes on many things. It was a great conversation, from person to person, from a former striker to a striker and a manager to player. It was impressive like his career. His love for the football club comes through in every word he says."

PREMIER LEAGUE

Liverpool prepare to seal title after Arsenal draw with Palace

AFP
London

Mikel Arteta admitted Arsenal have to get their "energy" back for the Champions League showdown with Paris Saint-Germain after a lacklustre 2-2 draw against Crystal Palace left Liverpool on the brink of winning the Premier League.

Arteta's side were hoping to warm up for their first Champions League semi-final appearance since 2009 with a victory over Palace at the Emirates Stadium on Wednesday. But Jakub Kiwior's third-minute header for the Gunners was cancelled out by Eberechi Eze's volley in the 27th minute.

Leandro Trossard's strike put Arsenal back in front three minutes before half-time, only for Palace substitute Jean-Philippe Mateta to loft a brilliant lob over out of position keeper David Raya in the 83rd minute.

Second-placed Arsenal are 12 points adrift of Liverpool, and with only four matches left for the north Londoners, Arne Slot's team will seal the title if they avoid defeat against Tottenham at Anfield on Sunday.

Their title hopes effectively over several weeks ago, Arsenal were already focused on winning the Champions League for the first time. But the sloppy display against Palace was hardly ideal preparation for the showdown with French champions PSG, who have eliminated Liverpool and Aston Villa en route to the last four.

"We are disappointed with the result and performance. We didn't find enough consistency in actions to dominate the game," Arteta said. "In many aspects we should have done better. Palace were very organised and deserved credit but we dropped our standards. We struggled to find consistency. We gave the ball away in simple ways and we were late in everything we did. We have to do much better."

Adding to Arteta's concerns is an injury to Mikel Merino that gave the Spaniard out of the Palace game and could sideline him

against PSG. Merino is a midfielder by trade but has been operating as an effective makeshift striker after Arsenal were hit by injuries to Kai Havertz and Gabriel Jesus.

"We will have to wait and see as they were not able to be in the squad here," said when asked if Merino and defender Ben White would be fit to face PSG. It was Arsenal's ninth league draw in a match they were leading this season, the most by a team in a single campaign since Tottenham in 2007-08.

Arsenal's repeated failure to kill off opponents has resulted in 13 draws from 34 leagues games, helping put Liverpool within touching distance of a record-equalling 20th English title. Likely to finish as Premier League runners-up for a third successive season, Arteta's team hope to end their five-year trophy drought in memorable style in the Champions League.

Arteta insisted they were not distracted by the chance to reach the final for the first time since 2006. But he conceded it would be useful for his injury-hit squad to have almost a week off before facing Luis Enrique's men. "We have spoke about avoiding our focus being elsewhere. We have enough time to prepare for PSG but today we didn't deliver enough to win the game," he said.

"It is nice to have long gap, we need it and we need players back to full strength. We have so many players out and not available and therefore you drop certain standards. We have the most important game of the season in six days. We need to get our energy back."

With an FA Cup semi-final against Aston Villa tomorrow, Palace could have been forgiven for taking it easy in north London. Manager Oliver Glasner started with key forwards Mateta and Ismaila Sarr on the bench to keep them fresh for Wembley, but Palace gave a spirited display.

"It was not our goal to decide the title, it was our goal to win the game. A draw is a very good result. More important is the performance. We are back on the track," Glasner said.



Second-placed Arsenal are 12 points adrift of Liverpool, and with only four matches left for the north Londoners, Arne Slot's team will seal the title if they avoid defeat against Tottenham at Anfield on Sunday. *(Reuters)*

Real Madrid's Camavinga set to miss rest of season with injury

Madrid: Real Madrid midfielder Eduardo Camavinga is set to miss the rest of the season after he was diagnosed with a groin injury. The French international sustained the injury during Real Madrid's 1-0 win over Getafe in La Liga on Wednesday.

Spanish media report Camavinga will miss the Copa del Rey final tomorrow against rivals Barcelona, as well as Madrid's final five league games as they try to overhaul the Catalan leaders. Camavinga may also miss the Club World Cup this summer in the United States, with some reports suggesting he will be sidelined for three months.

The 22-year-old has struggled for form this season at Madrid after playing an important role in their conquest of a La Liga and Champions League double last year.

NEWCASTLE BOSS HOWE RETURNS TO WORK AFTER PNEUMONIA

Newcastle manager Eddie Howe has returned

to work at the club's training centre after recovering from pneumonia, the Premier League outfit said. Howe, 47, was admitted to hospital earlier this month and missed league games against Manchester United, Crystal Palace and Aston Villa.

"Newcastle United are delighted to confirm that Eddie Howe has returned to his duties at the club's training centre," the club said. "Eddie had recently been hospitalised with pneumonia and has now returned to work after a period of recovery. We thank supporters for their warm wishes."

Fifth-placed Newcastle beat United and Palace convincingly under the stewardship of assistant manager Jason Tindall but lost heavily to Aston Villa. The Magpies, who won the League Cup last month, host lowly Ipswich on Saturday and are hoping to regain momentum in their push for Champions League qualification.

The top five finishers in the Premier

League will all qualify for Europe's top club competition next season.

Liverpool are on the brink of the Premier League title and Arsenal are favourites to finish second but just four points separate third-placed Manchester City from Villa, in seventh spot.

REAL SOCIEDAD COACH ALGUACIL TO LEAVE AT END OF SEASON

Real Sociedad coach Imanol Alguacil will leave the club at the end of the season after more than six years at the helm, the Spanish side announced.

Spaniard Alguacil took over in December 2018 and led the Basque outfit to the Copa del Rey title two years later as well as the Champions League last 16 in 2024. The 53-year-old's contract comes to an end this summer, with Sociedad in ninth spot in La Liga, four points outside the European places with five games to play.